

The Village

Among the Ovimbundu the outstanding social and political unit at the present time is the village (*imbo*, plural *ovaimbo*). The village may consist of from 5 to 500 households,¹ the heads of which are in the great majority of cases related to each other in the male line. Each village has a headman or elder (*sekulu*, literally 'grandfather' or 'elder father') who is literally, according to Umbundu kinship usage, the patriarch of the villagers. He was formerly responsible for his village to the sub-chief, and through him to the king. At the present time, the administrative authorities hold the village headmen responsible for matters relating to taxes, labour recruiting, &c. The present decay of this office and of village life varies very greatly from region to region. Nearly everywhere matters of purely local concern are not directly interfered with, and the headman continues his patriarchal government, assisted by a council of all (male) householders.

Ngendo, a typical village. The village of Ngendo lies at about 14° 40' east, 11° 40' south, about thirty-five miles south-west of the Keve, where that river crosses the fifteenth parallel, and about sixty miles in a direct line from the Atlantic Ocean. Its altitude is about 1,650 metres, and the ground on which it is built slopes down to a small stream of the Keve system. Directly across the stream to the north rises the granite outcrop on which may be seen the ruined fortress of Usengo. Ngendo belongs to the tribe of Kasongi, *etumbu* of Ekongo. It is about fifteen miles north-west of the administrative post of Cassongue and about two miles from the motor road which connects that post and points farther inland with the district capital and port of Novo Redondo.

The most striking feature of this village is the fact that it consists of four smaller units or wards (*ovitawila*, plural), each of which appears to be quite self-contained. The four together make up the village (*imbo*), which name is also applied to either of the two larger units by themselves. Each unit has its own elder, but

¹ Most, but not all, of the larger villages are *olombala* (q.v., *supra*), but even these are not as large now as they formerly were. In 1850 the *ombala* of Bailundu was said to have 5,000 inhabitants (Magyar, op. cit.). At the present time there is probably no village with more than 3,000 inhabitants, and few of that size. The tendency seems to be toward smaller villages, and there is even some movement toward isolated households and farmsteads after the fashion of so many of the Southern Bantu.

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are small streams of pure water falling down the cliffs and hillsides. 361
Near Bailundu and Ngalandi, villages still retain their defences which
consist of high poles set in a trench.

Judging from sites visited at Elende there was a pre-Ovimbundu 172
stone-building culture. One of the sites has such a commanding 712
view over extensive plains and valleys that the position would be
almost impregnable. At the present day the line of fortifications is
well marked by stone walls three feet high. These are composed of
boulders to which the builders had ready access on adjacent hillsides.
Large stones were no doubt rolled from the slopes to the small plateau
chosen as a building site. This small plain lies midway between the
hill crest and the valley.

At present this old site, which is enclosed by lichen-covered walls,
is overgrown by tall grass and trees attaining twenty feet in height.
Photography would be uninformative unless a preliminary clearance
were made—a formidable task owing to the density of vegetation.

In the center of the enclosure is a group of transported boulders
possibly marking the site of a place of assembly. A search among the
long grass reveals stone slabs and cylindrical crushers which were used
for grinding grain over a very long period, as may be seen by the wear
on the base stone; some thick stones are so worn as to be almost per-
forated. Weather-worn stones that were probably used as scrapers,
are to be found. Surface potsherds are of the material of which
present-day Ovimbundu women make their cooking pots. These
sherds mark the places now used by small nomadic bands, hence the
surface pottery may have no connection with a pre-Umbundu culture.

In the vicinity of this walled stone village are hillside cairns
marking the sites of graves. These have been robbed by medicine-
men in search of material for their charms.

The Ovimbundu have no traditions regarding the site, neither is
there legendary or other evidence to show that the Ovimbundu ever
made their villages of stone. The raising of a cairn of stones over
the body of a hunter is, however, a present-day practice near Ganda
and in the Eseele country. [64]

If a site cannot be systematically worked, it is better left alone
until scientific investigation is possible. The preliminary clearance
of grass and timber would be a long process. The archaeological
material recovered from such a site would be of a uniform and simple
kind. There is no evidence of anything beyond an elementary stone
age culture.